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SUBJECT: CODEL HASTINGS DISCUSSES REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS
WITH ISRAELI MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Classified By: A/DCM Marc J. Sievers for reasons 1.4 (b),(d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Rep. Alcee Hastings on January 12, 2010 met with Baruch Bina, Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Deputy Director General for North America, and Nimrod Barkan, head of MFA's Research Division, to discuss regional affairs.

The Israelis laid out for Rep. Hastings some of the obstacles they saw as inhibiting a resumption of the peace process. These included a perception that had been held by some in the Arab World, including Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, that the U.S. would force Israel to make concessions. Bina also pointed to Palestinian reluctance to start negotiations from scratch with a new Israeli administration, while Barkan noted a possible preference among some Arab officials for indirect Palestinian-Israeli talks. The Israelis also touched on recent tensions with Turkey, noting that they have acted with restraint, and requesting that third parties help convince Turkey to improve the bilateral dynamic. Barkan explained that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad seemed comfortable with his position right now and would be unlikely to make concessions that the West was seeking. On Lebanon, Barkan said moderates there understood they would have to live with Syrian influence. He added that Israel was content with a deterrent-based cease-fire in the north, but warned that Hizballah was still actively targeting Jewish and Israeli targets in third countries. There was little discussion of Iran, but the Israelis were interested in seeing what kind of sanctions would be placed on Tehran, and they noted how important it would be to gauge Arab -- especially Syrian -- reaction. Finally, the two sides discussed the plight of Iraqi refugees. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Rep. Hastings was accompanied in his meetings by his Chief of Staff Lale Mamaux, HPSCI Professional Staff Member Linda Cohen, Policy Advisor Alex Johnson, and Military Aide Maj. Timothy Thurston, and Poloff. Bina and Barkan were joined by Daniel Meron, Minister for Congressional Affairs at the Israeli Embassy in Washington.

OBSTACLES TO RESTARTING PEACE TALKS WITH THE PALESTINIANS

¶3. (C) Rep. Hastings began by providing an overview of his tour of the region, telling his Israeli interlocutors that many leaders in the region were placing great importance on the upcoming Arab Summit and what it would mean for the peace process. Bina explained that the GOI has put a priority on restarting peace talks, but the Palestinians have backed themselves into a corner. In his view, the Palestinians and their Arab allies saw public differences between the U.S. and the GOI over Israeli settlements as signifying broader tensions between the two long-time friends. He assessed that Abbas had been waiting for the U.S. to "deliver" Israel without the Palestinians having to make any negotiated concessions. Once it became clear that the U.S.-Israel relationship was solid, Abbas found it difficult to figure

out a way to engage in talks without undermining his domestic standing. Instead of talks, the Palestinian leadership has turned to dragging Israel through various international courts and institutions, Bina said, claiming that the Palestinians openly tell Israeli officials that this strategy gives the Palestinians the upper-hand.

¶4. (C) According to Bina, another obstacle to restarting the negotiations is that the Palestinians reject the Netanyahu government's unwillingness to pick up the talks where former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert left off. Bina said that partially negotiated agreements are not agreements. He suggested that if Olmert had signed a full agreement, or one or more interim agreements, then the Netanyahu government would be obligated to continue that path. One option he noted observers were talking about, including Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, was to shift to a paradigm of "conflict management" instead of conflict resolution until such time that the two sides were prepared to reach a deal. He described this path as "less glorious," but said it could lead to real improvements.

¶5. (C) Barkan's assessment tracked with Bina's. He said that when the U.S. backed off from its apparent commitments in early 2009 for a complete freeze in Israeli settlement building, it "left Abbas to the lions." The Palestinian leader cannot now enter talks without a concrete end game, and he has domestic and Arab support to maintain this posture. It would be helpful, according to Barkan, if the Arab states would back Palestinian engagement with Israel. He is skeptical, however, predicting that the Arab Summit in Libya on March 27 is likely to only force further

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entrenchment by the Palestinian leader. He explained that Arab officials appear to prefer as an alternative to direct negotiations proximity talks in which the U.S. would shuttle between two sides and then present a package deal for each to consider.

TENSIONS WITH TURKEY

¶6. (C) Bina also commented on the recent flare-up in relations between Israel and Turkey over a program aired on Turkish television that contained inflammatory portrayals of Israel. Bina said that the government in Ankara, though it does not have control over the content of the program, "surely gave a wink and a nod" to it airing on television. He suggested to Rep. Hastings that there was a pattern of Turkish behavior, highlighting Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's public bashing of Israeli President Shimon Peres in Davos, Switzerland in early 2009. Meron added that Israel has shown a lot of restraint by not recalling its ambassador from Ankara. He said this was because Israel recognizes the strategic importance of the large, secular Muslim state. Still, he hoped that friends, including the U.S., could convey to leaders in Turkey the importance of calming tensions between the two sides.

SYRIA AND LEBANON

¶7. (C) Barkan said that Asad appears very comfortable as a leader right now. He assessed that Asad feels he has done enough to contain Syria's economic problems, which makes him less vulnerable to economic pressure, allowing him to maintain his foreign policy views without making concessions to the West. Asad also seems to feel as though he has deftly reinstated Syria's special status in Lebanon without significant international opposition. He was skeptical that Syria would be prepared any time soon to change its ways. He advised that if U/S Burns travels to Damascus the Syrians will bargain with him as if they were in the souk (market).

They will ask for more and more, he predicted, and they will act surprised that the U.S. has not already given them what they are seeking.

¶18. (C) Barkan said that the moderates in Lebanon understand they must live with Syrian influence, as they cannot rely on the Saudis, who are seeking broad Arab reconciliation in a move to counter Iran. Barkan surmised that Israeli interests in Lebanon are minimal. All Israel needed was a continuing deterrence-based cease-fire on its northern border. He noted that Hezbollah was getting stronger, but added that the threat of Israeli reprisals, potential Syrian opposition, and a Lebanese domestic political constituency to answer to all make Hezbollah unlikely to seek a broad confrontation. He said, however, that Hezbollah is working actively to strike Israeli and Jewish targets in third countries, but is keeping a low profile to avoid Israeli reprisals directed at them in Lebanon. Hastings told his MFA interlocutors that Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri related that the meeting Hariri had with Syrian President Asad had been the most difficult thing he had done in his life. The Congressman added that Hariri spoke of Turkish mediation between Syria and Lebanon, which the Israelis found interesting.

IRAN: LOOKING TOWARD SANCTIONS

¶19. (C) Rep. Hastings explained that from his consultations in the region he found that Arab neighbors did not want to see a nuclear Iran, but they also feared fallout from a military intervention there. Bina said Israel supported the Obama Administration's engagement policy, but the GOI is now waiting to see what kind of additional sanctions will be placed on Iran. He noted that upcoming French presidency of the UNSC could prove "interesting." He added that gauging the Arab reaction to the American handling of Iran was important. If the U.S. is perceived to be soft on Iran, it will encourage Syria to not change its ways.

IRAQI REFUGEES MUST BE ASSISTED

¶110. (C) Rep. Hastings also highlighted the potential problem of Iraqi refugees in the region turning to terrorism if host countries do not do more to meet their pressing needs. Bina agreed with Rep. Hastings that this could present a problem

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in the region. He said Jordan, in particular, fears a potential meltdown in Iraq if the U.S. leaves that country, and he anticipated the Jordanians would ask Israel for assistance if any Iraqi instability spilled over into Jordan.

¶111. (U) CODEL Hastings did not clear this cable.
CUNNINGHAM